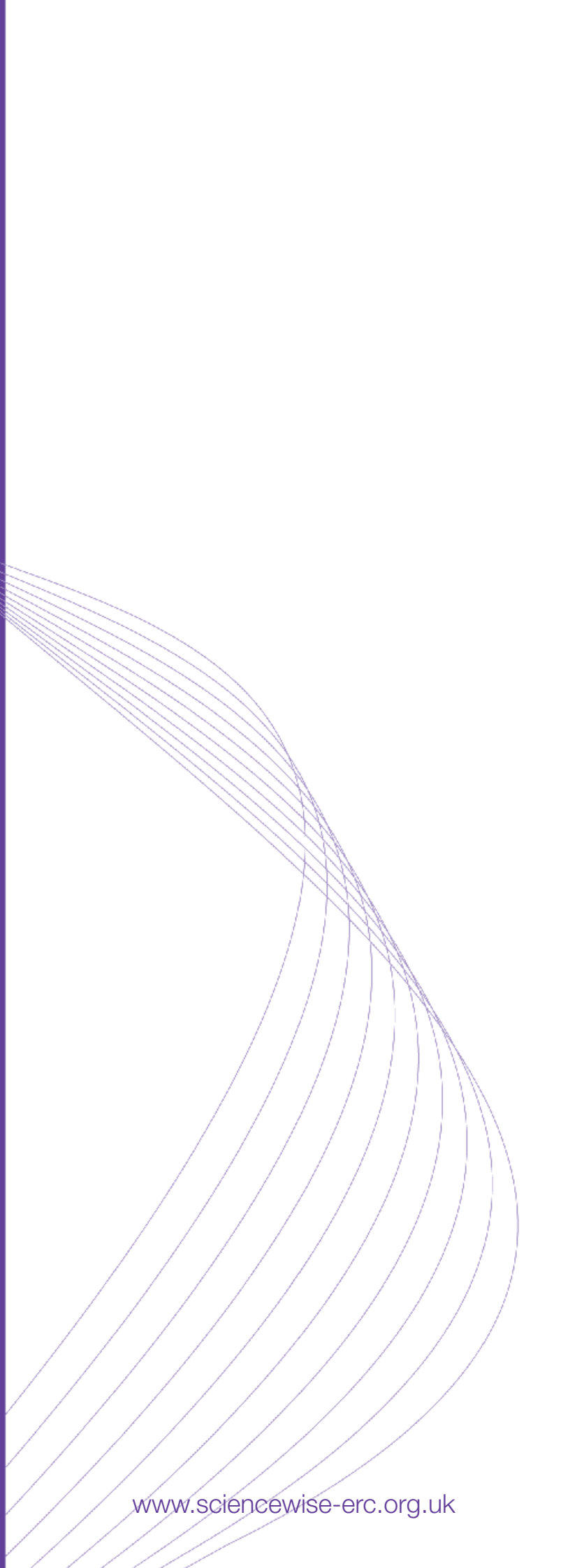




The Government's Approach to Public Dialogue on Science and Technology





The need for public dialogue on science and technology

The Government believes that if the UK is to take full advantage of the opportunities for creating wealth and improving quality of life offered by scientific discovery and technological development, it is crucial that we develop new approaches to bring scientists and the public together in a constructive dialogue to explore emerging issues.

The Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre for Public Dialogue in Science and Innovation (Sciencewise-ERC), funded by the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, provides assistance to policy makers to carry out public dialogue, a two-way conversation with members of the public, to inform their decision-making on science and technology issues.

The purpose and status of this document

This document outlines a set of guiding principles for public dialogue on science and technology-related issues. These guidelines have been developed by the Government through its Sciencewise-ERC programme, in collaboration with policy makers, practitioners, academics and representatives of the scientific and business communities working in the areas of science policy and public engagement. The Department for Business, Innovation & Skills is very grateful to all those who have contributed to the development of these principles.

These guidelines are compatible with the Government's code of practice on consultation (published January 2004)¹, and provide more detail on the Government's proposed approach to public dialogue set out in the Science & Innovation Investment Framework 2004-2014 (published July 2004)².

These guidelines provide the basis of dialogue activity carried out under Sciencewise-ERC funded projects. In addition they provide guidance in best practice in dialogue activity, which Sciencewise-ERC recommends be adopted in all dialogue activity.

This document should, therefore, be considered in relation to the following:

- Consultations and public dialogue activities on specific science and technology related issues to be carried out by (or on behalf of) departments, advisory

committees, agencies or non-departmental public bodies (including research councils)

This document will be kept under review and the guidance will be revised and re-issued periodically.

What is public dialogue?

Public dialogue is a process during which members of the public interact with scientists, stakeholders (for example, businesses and pressure groups) and policy makers to deliberate on issues likely to be important in future policies.

Some of this deliberation must be face-to-face and it needs to give all sides the chance to speak, question and be questioned by others. It must take place far enough ahead of policy being made to be able to have some influence over the eventual policy decisions.

Such dialogue is normally commissioned by policy makers who are in the process of formulating policy positions, so it feeds directly into the policy-making process. A key requisite of public dialogue as developed by Sciencewise-ERC is that it must have a 'policy hook' with a clear understanding of who will be listening to the outcomes.

Public dialogue is:

- talking with the public about ethical and societal issues
- about the instigators of the dialogue being prepared to change their minds
- about getting public and different perspectives to help explore issues, aspirations and concerns when shaping policy
- gathering public experience in science and technology issues

Public dialogue is not:

- one-way communication or 'information gathering' techniques such as surveys, focus groups, polls, or some citizens' panels
- representative - participants do not formally represent their geographic area or discipline
- a talking shop with no policy purpose
- about the public actually making decisions - these are ultimately the responsibility of elected Government Ministers
- about simply supporting or seeking acceptance for preconceived policies

¹ www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/consultation/code.htm. As with the code on consultation, UK non-departmental public bodies and local authorities are encouraged to follow this guidance. Devolved Administrations are free to adopt this guidance should they wish to do so.

² www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending_review/spend_sr04/associated_documents/spending_sr04_science.cfm

Why carry out public dialogue?

Public dialogue is carried out in order to inform Government thinking and the thinking of other participants and to add to the body of evidence presented to Ministers. It can facilitate better discussions around science and result in better decisions for society.

According to the Government's Science & Innovation Investment Framework 2004-2014, 'The Government wants constructive, inclusive and open public debate and dialogue on these issues', and '...will work to enable the debate to take place 'upstream' in the scientific and technological development process, not 'downstream' where technologies are waiting to be exploited...'

The DIUS/RCUK Public Attitudes to Science Survey 2008 concluded that:

- the public is *very positive* about science
- scientists need to listen to the public
- science communication is often too *top down*
- there are issues with trust in science and its governance

The 'Jenkin Report 2000' stated that: '...direct dialogue with the public should move from being an optional add-on to science-based policy-making and to the activities of research organisations and learned institutions, and should become a normal and integral part of the process'.

In addition, the Council for Science and Technology's Policy through Dialogue report in 2005 recommended that the Government develop a 'corporate memory' for public dialogue.

The Sciencewise-ERC is building a body of evidence, which shows that the earlier a policy area is discussed with a group of citizens who have access to key scientists, pressure groups and other leaders in the field, the better and more robust that policy will be, and the more certain Government and Ministers can be that the policy will be successfully implemented.

Our aim

Our aim is for a society where the public, the broad science community and policy makers feel comfortable with the direction taken by science and technology and

feel a sense of purpose in ensuring that the full benefits of science and technology are realised for society.

Our objective

Our objective is to enable more informed policy in science and technology and so build confidence in decision-making related to the undertaking, development and overall governance of science and technology; to build on the public's generally positive views of science - and to both maximise the opportunities offered by new areas of science and technology and minimise potential downsides.

Our approach

We want to elicit both the aspirations and concerns of the UK population in the development of new areas of science and technology. Our approach will be to enrich decision-making by gathering and analysing broad intelligence on the full range of issues (technological, scientific, environmental, social, ethical, legal and economic) related to emerging new areas of science and technology and their governance. Such dialogue will inform, rather than determine policy and decision-making by those empowered to do so.

Facilitation

We will facilitate this through robust, timely, inclusive and properly resourced dialogue that is clearly linked into decision-making processes around science and technology. Such dialogue will involve the public, scientists (both publicly and privately funded), policy makers and other perspectives, and will explore existing or potential opportunities as well as concerns related to ethical, health, safety and environmental issues.

Conduct

We will ensure that dialogue is informed, drawing on evidence and information from a wide variety of sources. It will operate according to the principles of openness, honesty and fairness, designed to generate mutual understanding of views and underpinned by a willingness to take account of the outcomes of such dialogue in decision-making. We will communicate the reasons for our decisions widely and in a clear and timely manner.

Commitment

We are committed to listening to and taking account of views expressed in our policy and decision-making. We believe strongly that public dialogue will help us to identify and deal with the issues arising.

We are committed to embedding and improving our approach to public dialogue on science and technology. We will promote a coherent approach across Government and beyond; continually reviewing policy, guidance and experience to ensure that our approach is compatible with and contributes to good practice. We will ensure that the learning gained from this approach is disseminated widely within the science, engineering and technology community and beyond.

The guiding principles for public dialogue in science and technology

Based on theoretical understandings and practical experience, the essential elements of public dialogue on science and technology are set out below. The Government has adopted the approach set out in this document, but recognises that this guidance will continue to be refined as experience grows.

The key principles for public dialogue seek to ensure that:

- the conditions leading to the dialogue process are conducive to the best outcomes (**Context**)³
- the range of issues and policy opinions covered in the dialogue reflects the participants' interests (**Scope**)
- the dialogue process itself represents best practice in design and execution (**Delivery**)
- the outputs of dialogue can deliver the desired outcomes (**Impact**)
- the process is shown to be robust and contributes to learning (**Evaluation**)

In fulfilling these principles, it is recognised that the specific context of each issue will determine the relative importance of each of the following principles. However, as far as practicable, public dialogue on science and technology aims to:

(1) Context⁴

- Be clear in its purposes and objectives from the outset
- Be well timed in relation to public and political concerns
- Commence as early as possible in the policy/decision process
- Feed into public policy - with commitment and buy-in from policy actors
- Take place within a culture of openness, transparency and participation with sufficient account taken of hard to reach groups where necessary
- Have sufficient resources in terms of time, skills and funding
- Be governed in a way appropriate to the context and objectives

(2) Scope

- Cover both the aspirations and concerns held by the public, scientists in the public and private sector, and policy makers
- Be focused on specific issues, with clarity about the scope of the dialogue. Where appropriate we will work with participants to agree framings that focus on broad questions and a range of alternatives to encourage more in-depth discussion. For example, we might start by asking, "How do we provide for our energy needs in the future?" rather than starting by asking "should we build new nuclear power stations?"
- Be clear about the extent to which participants will be able to influence outcomes. Dialogue will be focused on informing, rather than determining policy and decisions
- Involve a number and demographic of the population that is appropriate to the task to give robustness to the eventual outcomes⁵

(3) Delivery

- Ensure that policy makers and experts promoting and/or participating in the dialogue process are competent in their own areas of specialisation and in the techniques and requirements of dialogue. Measures may need to be put in place to build the capacity of the public, experts and policy makers to enable effective participation

³ The means by which dialogue can impact upon policy and decision-making will be specific to each organisation involved in the dialogue process and each issue under consideration. It is important, therefore, that organisations involved in dialogue address their own institutional arrangements and working practices to ensure effective application of dialogue processes.

⁴ It is probably not advisable to embark upon a dialogue process, where these requirements cannot be met.

⁵ Where advice is sought very early on in decision-making on an issue that is not yet known about by the public, this may be a 'narrow but deep' approach, including a small group of participants. Where there is some knowledge and the impact is likely to be wide-ranging the policy is nearer to being formed and/or is controversial, an approach involving a wider number of people may be appropriate. This must be decided on a case by case basis.

- Employ techniques and processes appropriate to the objectives. Multiple techniques and methods may be used within a dialogue process, where the objectives require it
- Be organised and delivered by competent bodies
- Include specific aims and objectives for each element of the process
- Take place between the general public and scientists (including publicly and privately funded experts) and other specialists as necessary. Policy makers will also be involved where necessary
- Be accessible to all who wish to take part with special measures to access hard to reach groups, including considerations of appropriate venues and technical equipment in line with the Disability and Discrimination Act 1995⁶. Where the objectives require it, media partners may be needed to ensure that the process reaches the wider population
- Be conducted fairly with no in-built bias; non-confrontational, with no faction allowed to dominate; all participants treated respectfully; and all participants enabled to understand and question others' claims and knowledge
- Provide participants with information and views from a range of perspectives, and access information from other sources, thus making them informed
- Be deliberative - allowing time for participants to become informed in the area; be able to reflect on their own and others' views; and explore issues in depth with other participants. The context and objectives for the process will determine whether it is desirable to seek consensus, or to map out the range of views
- Be appropriately 'representative' - the range of participants may need to reflect both the range of relevant interests, and pertinent socio-demographic characteristics (including geographical coverage). At times, there may be a need to enable participants to be self-selecting. In these circumstances, there will be measures in place to take account of any potential bias this may cause. NOTE: Public dialogue does not claim to be fully representative, rather it is a group of the public, who, after adequate information, discussion, access to specialists and time to deliberate, form considered advice which gives a strong indication

of how the public at large feels about certain issues. The methodology and results need to be robust enough to give policy makers a good basis on which to make policy

(4) Impact

- Ensure that participants, the scientific community and policy makers and the wider public can easily understand the outputs across the full range of issues considered
- Ensure that participants' views are taken into account, with clear and transparent mechanisms to show how these views have been taken into account in policy and decision-making
- Influence the knowledge and attitudes of the public, policy makers and the scientific community towards the issue at hand
- Influence the knowledge and attitudes of the public, policy makers and the scientific community towards the use of public dialogue in informing policy and decision-making
- Encourage collaboration, networking, broader participation and co-operation in relation to public engagement in science and technology
- Be directed towards those best placed to act upon its outputs⁷
- To represent the rationale and implications of divergent views

(5) Evaluation

- Be evaluated in terms of process and outcome, so that experience and learning gained can contribute to good practice
- Ensure that evaluation commences as early as possible, and continues throughout the process
- Ensure that evaluation addresses the objectives and expectations of all participants in the process
- Be evaluated by independent parties (where appropriate)
- Addressing the reasons for adoption or non-adoption is the responsibility of policy makers

⁶ Download the Disability Rights Commission's very useful guide at http://www.drc-gb.org/library/publications/services_and_transport/organising_accessible_events.aspx?basket=add&pub=Organising+Accessible+Events%7cSP13

⁷ For example, directing dialogue on aspirations to the scientific and business communities will help to inform decisions on setting research priorities. Similarly, Government will gain a better view of the potential of new technologies. Directing dialogue on concerns to the Government will help inform decisions on regulatory responses - scientists and businesses will also increase their understanding of (and responsiveness to) the public.

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